“The pain she feels, I don’t feel it, but I feel for her”
A case study of urban teenage schoolboys’ knowledge and attitudes towards menstruation in Ghana

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Abstract
Menstrual health management can be a difficulty for menstruating women and girls, especially in low- and middle-income countries or other areas of poverty. Menstruation being characterized by stigmatisation, myths and taboo makes it especially troublesome, preventing women and girls to handle their menstruation safely and with dignity. Male attitudes have been argued to play an important role in perpetuating these stigmas and taboos, yet little is known about them. This study sets out to investigate male menstrual knowledge and attitudes, the role of religion in shaping menstrual attitudes and the potential consequences for menstruating women and girls. Qualitative data from group interviews with 24 boys aged 15-19 in a Senior High School in Accra, Ghana is used as basis for analysis. The results are organised along three themes, reflecting the three sub-research questions guiding the study. Findings demonstrate how schoolboys have an elemental understanding of the physiological process of menstruation yet demonstrate a deep understanding of cultural restrictions and the way menstruation may be experienced. Attitudes contain both positive and negative elements, including menstruation as normal and natural on the one hand, and the menstruating girl as unclean and impure on the other. Religion seem to play in important role in perpetuating negative menstrual attitudes, reinforcing the idea of menstruation as impure and unclean. Potential consequences of these attitudes risk menstruation continuing being considered as unclean and impure in addition to be neglected as a “girl’s matter”. However, respondents also identified menstrual difficulties which may foster supportive involvement in menstruation. The findings suggest the importance of continuing to address the surrounding communities of menstruating women and girls, including within and outside of educational and religious institutions.

Keywords: Menstruation, Male menstrual attitudes, Menstrual health management, Religion, Ghana.
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R11: When a lady is menstruating, it doesn’t mean that she’s not part of human rights or something like that, she’s also a human who has to have free movement, socialisation and other stuff.
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1. Introduction

An issue experienced by 26% of the world’s population and 300 million people daily, intersecting a range of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is in spite of this, seldom mentioned. The issue is: menstruation. Lack of information, adequate sanitation facilities and proper and affordable menstrual care products affect women and girls’ all aspects of life; health, access to education, employment, safety and quality of life, connecting menstruation to a range of corresponding SDGs (Tellier and Hyttel, 2017; House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012:8; WaterAid, n.d.; SIDA, 2016). Especially SDG number 5: Gender Equality aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (United Nations, n.d.) where adequate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) is an issue of gender inequality, especially true for women and girls living in low- and middle-income countries (Mason et al., 2017).

Menstruation is an important issue to address due to its extensive impact on a woman’s life. Studies have shown girls being absent from school several days per month or discontinued their education completely due to menstruation (Bobel, 2019). This especially is a problem as women with higher levels of education tend to be healthier, have higher participation in the formal labour market, earn higher incomes, marry at an older age, and in case they become mothers; have fewer children and enable better health care and education for them. These factors combined tend to lead out of poverty for households, communities and nations (World Bank, 2017). It should not be failed to be recognized however, the fundamental importance of the fact that menstruators\(^1\) should be able to manage their menstruation with dignity and shall not solely be used as an economic lever (Bobel, 2019:46).

Moreover, one of the most recurrent mentioned issues of MHM is the high levels of fear, shame and social and/or personal limitations to mobility or other restrictions preventing them from participating in school or social events. It has been shown that inadequate knowledge and negative attitudes towards menstruation contributes to the discomfort of girls (Tellier and Hyttel, 2017). Evident in both global reviews and country specific studies, menstruation is highly stigmatized, mythicised and surrounded by taboo resulting in a negative emotional impact on menstruators. It has been suggested that one largely contributing factor to the endurance is male attitudes (Mason et al., 2017; Burrows and Johnson, 2005). The plethora of accounts from schoolgirls demonstrates the fears of leakage or staining and the subsequent

\(^1\) Menstruator is a gender-neutral term for people who menstruate. In this thesis, the term menstruator will be used interchangeably with women/ (and) girls, due to women/girls being the norm within research. Please note the awareness of the debate regarding trans inclusion and therefore the controversiality of the concepts women and girls in discussions about menstruation, an experience which may be shared by people of all genders.
teasing from boys. This is a strong indicator for the necessity to investigate the attitudes of schoolboys in the same age group, as attitudes are likely to have a long-term impact on MHM. Similarly, formal institutions including religious institutions, shape the cultural norms, social rules and behaviour within a society, having a substantial impact on the strength of gender roles and attitudes (Inglehart and Norris, 2003), suggesting the importance of investigating the role of religion in menstrual attitudes. Findings support that negative views of menstruation or the menstruating woman can be connected to negative notions of women generally, meaning that if boys display or host negative attitudes towards menstruation, this is crucial to change in order to reconstruct unequal gender relations (Tellier and Hyttel, 2017; Peranovic and Bentley, 2016). Despite the scope of the issue and the arguments made, there is little knowledge of the actual views and perspectives on menstruation hosted by males as perspectives mostly come second-hand by narratives from women and girls (Chang, Hayter and Lin, 2011., 2011; Mason et al., 2017).

1.1 Aim and Research question
This study intends to add to the expanding body of literature on MHM and education within the development sector by contributing to filling the research gap on men and boys’ knowledge and attitudes towards menstruation. In order to do this, this study will use group interviews to examine the attitudes and knowledge about menstruation amongst teenage schoolboys in Accra, Ghana. This yields the following head research question:

What is the knowledge and attitudes towards female menstruation among teenage schoolboys in Accra, Ghana, what role does religion seem to play in affecting menstrual attitudes and what potential consequences do the attitudes entail?

More specifically, the research question can be divided into three sub-questions:

- What knowledge do the boys display around menstruation?
- What attitudes (positive and negative) do the boys articulate in relation to menstruation and what role does religion seem to play in the attitudes?
- What consequences might the attitudes have for women’s experience of menstruation?

The purpose of the study is to include boys in the larger project of gender equality by identifying their knowledge and attitudes about menstruation. The results provide important information for future research and development practice by yielding more empirical knowledge, identifying the basis of young male knowledge, attitudes and support (or lack thereof),
providing insights into where efforts can be put to ultimately enhance gender equality. Due to previous research pointing to religion being an important factor in perpetuating negative gender attitudes, this is also investigated in the present study.

1.2 Case selection
Ghana makes an interesting case for mainly two reasons; firstly, studies on MHM in resource poor countries have been heavily concentrated in a handful of Sub-Saharan countries or the South Asia region, especially Kenya, Uganda and India are hubs of MHM activity (Kuhlmann, Henry and Wall, 2017; Bobel, 2019). This means that Ghana provides a new geographical context from where little knowledge regarding menstrual attitudes is known. Secondly, Ghana represents an interesting case due to its level of religiosity, as religion is also one of the focuses in the present study. Ghana is a highly religious country by a range of measures. According to the World Values Survey, 97% of the Ghanaian population consider themselves as a religious person, 91.1% find religion to be very important in their lives, 99,7% say they believe in God and 72.3% pray several times a day (Inglehart et al., n.d.). Roughly three quarters of the population is Christian, and almost one fifth of the population is Muslim (Utrikespolitiska Institutet, 2016a). However, as elaborated on in section 3.2, which religion seem to be of little importance as negative menstrual attitudes are evident across almost all world religions.

Statistics regarding the social conditions and public health in Ghana demonstrate Ghana as a poor country, although it has improved in many regards. This includes reaching the Millennium Development Goal of having halved the extreme poverty rates by 2015 (Utrikespolitiska Institutet, 2016b). As of 2017, Ghana has a Human Development Index value of 0.592 on a scale from 0-1, ranking it at 140 out of 189 countries and territories. This puts the country in the medium human development category (UNDP, 2018).

1.3 Limitations
There are two main limitations to the present study which one need to take into account. Firstly, due to the limited scope of the study, the third sub-question relating to the consequences of male menstrual attitudes are not investigated empirically but is rather examined from a theoretical point of view using previous research. In addition to this, the theoretical background is based off of studies on MHM from all of the Global South and not specifically Ghana or e.g. a west African context. Although the research points in a similar direction in terms of existing taboo and stigma, the configurations of these may differ as the meaning of menstruation is constructed in developing and context-specific, socio-cultural representations and practices,
expressing itself differently in different contexts (Burrows and Johnson, 2005:247; Bobel, 2019:12). Naturally, this raises an issue of credibility for the present study.

Secondly, the findings of the study are difficult to generalize to other contexts. To start with, the religious background of the students represents a minority of the Ghanaian population. Besides, participants could not necessarily be argued to represent the views of the male student population in the same school due to school staff selecting the participants (elaborated in section 4.2.1). However, the findings of the present study should not automatically be disregarded, as it still provides valuable insights into how some adolescent schoolboys think about menstruation, especially considering the research void on the topic.

1.4 Outline
I will initially provide a background to the study by describing the biological process of menstruation to provide a basic physiological understanding. Thereafter, I will elaborate on what previous research has found on schoolgirls’ experiences of menstruation in a school environment, and thereafter provide an account of the limited research regarding male menstrual attitudes from both the ‘Global South’ and North. Next, I will delve into the theoretical framework guiding this study by initially describing the importance of examining male attitudes towards menstruation, arguing that male menstrual attitudes have an important role in women and girls’ experience of menstruation. Following that, the role of religion to gender equitable attitudes, and specifically menstruation will be discussed. After that, the methodological approach is addressed. Starting with the design, material and method I go on to reflect on ethical and reflexive considerations. Thereafter, the analytical framework is discussed, providing the rationale for how the material is coded. Then, I present the findings of the present study, structured by the order of the sub-research questions. Lastly, I will end with the conclusion, discussing the implications of the present study’s findings and proposing areas for future research.

1.5 Background
1.5.1 What is Menstruation?
Menstruation is a natural physiological process experienced by women and girls from puberty to menopause. Age of menarche (the onset of menstruation) varies considerably, but roughly between the ages of 12-14 and is experienced monthly to the age of 45-55 (Planned Parenthood, n.d.). The menstrual cycle is the time from the first day of menstruation and continues to the first day of the consecutive menstruation, roughly 21-35 days long. During the menstrual cycle,
ovulation occurs when hormones controlling the ovaries causes a matured egg to be released from the ovary. The egg travels down the fallopian tube and into the uterus, where it can be fertilised by sperm. To prepare the body for pregnancy, hormones prepare a lining of the uterus where the fertilised egg can grow into a foetus. In case of the egg not becoming fertilised, the lining no longer has any function and will shrivel and the uterus discharges it as a bleeding; i.e. the menstrual bleeding consisting of blood and uterine tissue (Friedmann, 2017; Planned Parenthood, n.d.; Tellier and Hyttel, 2017). The most fertile period of the menstrual cycle is during the ovulation and finished one day after, usually 12-14 days before the next period, and least fertile is during or just after menstruating although pregnancy is still possible (NHS, 2018).

Menstruation may be experienced differently by different people where the primary sign of menstruation is the discharge from the vagina. However, it is common to experience additional symptoms including abdominal or pelvic cramping, lower back pain, food cravings, bloating and sore breasts, headache, fatigue, mood swings and irritability (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2017).
2. Literature review
There is an extensive and rapidly growing body of literature on the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of menstruation, particularly for adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries. Previous research regarding how menstruating schoolgirls experience and perceive their menstruation paint a universal picture. Consistently, results show high levels of shame, fear and social or personal imposed limitations to either mobility or other restrictions, preventing girls from engaging in school or other school events. Additionally, girls are generally uninformed and face a “menarche shock”, feel great shame, fear and are afraid to seek medical care when needed (Tellier and Hyttel, 2017).

Several studies from school settings across Sub-Saharan Africa, including Tanzania, Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya have demonstrated how managing menstrual hygiene is associated with social taboos of being seen as impure or dirty during menstruation, in addition to fear of being ridiculed for having stained oneself, and the shame, embarrassment and confusion in regards to how the body changes during puberty (Rheinländer et al., 2019:14). These feelings of shame and embarrassment makes it difficult to manage menstruation with dignity, as these feelings are so strongly linked with being female (Winkler and Roaf, 2015). Studies from various contexts continue to show how the fear of being teased during menstruation seems ubiquitous (Tellier and Hyttel, 2017). This has for example been seen in Kenya, Indonesia and Malawi (See: Mason et al., 2013; Bobel, 2019:26 and Piper Pillitteri, 2012).

From Ghana, Rheinländer et al.’s (2019) research on MHM in peri-urban Senior High Schools found similar results. Conducting focus group discussions with female students aged 15-23, findings indicated a strong fear of insults or punishments following not having “managed” their menstruation enough, driven by beliefs of menstruation as dirty. This caused girls to practice a ‘don’t tell’ policy regarding menstruation, especially towards boys and male teachers due to fears of sharing something ‘improper’. At times, this could include using a secret language to be able to communicate about menstruation discreetly (Rheinländer et al., 2019:21).

However, research on male knowledge and views of menstruation to date is largely unknown and under-researched. Research from western culture in the 1990s suggests negative male perceptions of the menstruating woman (Mason et al., 2017). More recently, a study of an older group (age 18-69) of Australian men’s attitudes and perceptions of menstruation found similar results. The men felt they had been excluded from conversations regarding menstruation, had inadequate menstrual education and had often been left to find out for themselves. The majority of the respondents spoke of menstruation as part of interpersonal relationships, especially romantic but also with friends or daughters. Attitudes among the
respondents varied, some discussed menstruation candidly, while others felt uncomfortable. It also arose as a “women’s business” (Peranovic & Bentley, 2017).

Still, little is known from low- and middle-income countries where menstruators face an increased likelihood to suffer more disadvantages due to lack of adequate MHM (Mason et al., 2017). However, the limited research that do exist also paint a fairly universal picture of boys lacking menstrual knowledge and being excluded from conversations about menstruation. In a comparative analysis of school boys of a slightly younger age than in the present study (age 13-17) across different schools in India, Mason et al. (2017) found that boys had a poor understanding of the physiological function of menstruation, but had a strong understanding of the cultural restrictions placed upon their female classmates and its negative effect. Similarly, a study from Taiwan showed that boys mainly held negative, stereotypical views and were ignorant of menstruation, but were on the other hand often denied when displaying an interest in learning more (Chang, Hayter and Lin, 2011, 2011).

Research on religious menstrual attitudes is elaborated on in section 3.2.
3. Theoretical framework

In this section I will first elaborate on why male menstrual attitudes matter and how it might matter for women's experiences of menstruation and its connection to gender equality (relating to research question two and three). Following this, I will elaborate on the role of religion in shaping attitudes towards menstruation (connected to research question two).

3.1 The importance of investigating male attitudes

Gender attitudes in general are especially important to investigate because of its gender (un)equal outcomes; norms, attitudes and stereotypes affects one's everyday behaviours and decisions, varying from decisions on whether to educate one's sons or daughters when having limited funds, or whether to promote a man or a woman to a new position in a workplace. Naturally, this is also a question of qualifications (e.g. who is the most suitable for the position) and the potential outcomes (e.g. will educating a boy lead to more income than for a girl?). However, the decision-making is ineluctably shaped by a gendered lens, influenced by the social conditions and the culture embedding a society’s norms and stereotypes. The internal gender ranking rule inherent to the gendered lens inhabited by everyone reflects the underlying power relations that represents the degree of gender equality of a society (Seguino, 2011).

Looking at gender attitudes more specifically in relation to menstruation, male menstrual attitudes are necessary to investigate also due to its gender (un)equal consequences. In this case, it means the several ways and range of areas in which men and boys may influence women and girls’ MHM. This includes within the household, school, work and community and can be done through many roles, including those of a husband, father, brother, student, teacher, peer, colleague, community leader, religious leader, employer and entrepreneur (Mahon, Tripathy and Singh, 2015). Additionally, males are arguably most probable to occupy several roles simultaneously, in addition to these changing over the course of their lifespan. For example, a teenage boy is likely to be a brother, son, and a peer to menstruating girls but as he grows older, he may no longer be a student, but is instead a brother, husband, father and perhaps a teacher. This enforces the importance to investigate young males’ attitudes, considering the importance they have on MHM currently, and will have in the future.

I will now elaborate on how males in their different roles may affect menstrual management. To be noted however, actions are hard to fully separate and attach to one specific role, as the ways a father can influence his daughters’ menstrual management may also be applicable to school staff.
Starting with the educational context, one of the most critical challenges for MHM in schools is the girls’ fear of showing menstrual staining on their clothing, and then being teased (sometimes by boys specifically), affecting the girls’ self-esteem. The fear of teasing has been cited as a reason for girls to stay home from school during menstruation (Tellier and Hyttel, 2017:12). Additionally, the fear of smelling or soiling their skirts felt by girls and the subsequent teasing means that girls have trouble engaging in class; they feel distracted, unable to concentrate and unwilling to participate in the form of writing on the blackboard in front of the class as this may reveal stains, leakage or odours (Kuhlmann, Henry and Wall, 2017; Mason et al., 2013). Central to this problem is the lack of adequate water and sanitation facilities complicating menstrual management which, in addition to poor menstrual care products, may result in stress and embarrassment (Kuhlmann, Henry and Wall, 2017). This may be further reinforced by beliefs of menstruating girls and menstrual blood as dirty and should be kept hidden, where menstruators delay or dread changing their products in school due to fear of exposing themselves and their menstrual blood (Rheinländer et al., 2019). Similarly, the role of school staff generally or male teachers more specifically may also impact proper MHM (Mahon, Tripathy and Singh, 2015). Teachers and particularly male teachers, risk being inadequately sensitized to the issues facing girls and thus, not allow girls to visit the bathroom or misinterpret girl’s inactivity in class during menstruation (UNESCO, 2014). On a similar note, knowledge and understandings about menstruation pre-menarche is often limited, resulting in young girls facing menarche with anxiety, sadness and fear (Bobel, 2019:292; Chandra-Mouli and Patel, 2017). This demonstrates the need for schools to educate young girls on menstruation pre-menarche to allow young menstruators to enter into menstruation without fear. Moreover, the provision of adequate infrastructure available for girls’ safe MHM lies with the school staff; including providing facilities where girls can change menstrual materials privately and as often as necessary, access to soap and water, and disposal for menstrual care products. Ultimately, this may result in girls not attending school during menstruation or to discontinue their education completely (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012). More on infrastructural difficulties is discussed below, as part of the household role.

On the other hand, in a household context, men are for example involved in making decisions regarding the allocation of household resources. In contexts where underlying socio-economic structures like kinship and marriage allocate power and authority primarily to men, women become dependent on men for access to food, health services, and other materials contributing positively to health status (Singh, Bloom and Tsui, 1998), including menstrual care products. This may mean that women and girls face problems acquiring these products which
is further exacerbated by caregiving of children being a primarily female responsibility, where men fail to take menstrual needs into account. In more extreme cases, studies have shown how girls engage in transactional sex to acquire menstrual products, in some cases being a norm. This increases a girl’s risk to experience violence, sexually transmitted infections and other threats (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012; Mason et al., 2013; Tellier and Hyttel, 2017). For girls using disposable pads, it is common to ration menstrual care products resulting in changing the pad less frequently, possibly resulting in discomfort, itching and even infections (Mason et al., 2013; Winkler and Roaf, 2015). Another decision that may be taken by men in the household is infrastructural, namely whether to build latrines where menstrual products can be changed adequately and in privacy. For girls using reusable pads or cloths, these needs to be thoroughly washed with soap and water and then dried in sunlight in order to boost disinfection and avoid the risk of infection. The lack of facilities like these, together with the menstrual taboos and stigma result in menstruators not having anywhere to wash their cloths adequately or dry them hygienically, resulting in using dark and secretive places, thus increasing the risk of infection (Mahon and Fernandes, 2010).

Looking to the larger community (including religious communities), males may act in support of their menstruating members, or demonstrate a lack thereof. Most importantly, as community or religious leaders, men could act to challenge traditional menstrual taboos, norms and stigma and thus, influence the attitudes of others (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012). For example, as noted above, for girls using menstrual care products made of fabric it is of vital importance to be able to wash and dry these fabrics hygienically (Mahon and Fernandes, 2010). This is hindered however, by local customs dictating menstruation to be kept secret and hidden away (Bobel, 2019:115). Considering how young girls tend to have low social capital, it is vital that the surrounding community acts in support of safe MHM to limit the potential negative consequences of challenging social and cultural norms, taboos and stigma (ibid.:306f).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that women and girls themselves are also part of the cultural process perpetuating cultural norms stigmatizing menstruation. For example, in interviews with NGO workers working with MHM in Nepal, the resistance to changing menstrual taboos from both men and women is revealed. Rather than the attitudes of older men being the main obstacle, it is women and specifically the mothers and mothers-in-law who are seen as most difficult (Mahon, Tripathy and Singh, 2015).

As has been noted above, there is a role for men and communities at large to become increasingly involved in menstrual issues, to aid in reducing the negative view of menstruation and restrictive practices, and to rather promote safer MHM through a range of roles (Mason et
al., 2017). To influence such change, it is crucial to better understand the knowledge and attitudes males have of menstruation for appropriate actions to be taken where men can become advocates for women and contribute in addressing these issues (ibid.). I will now elaborate on the role of religion in shaping menstrual attitudes.

3.2 Religious attitudes towards menstruation

As noted earlier, formal institutions including religious institutions, shape cultural norms, social rules and behaviour which have a considerable impact on the strength of gender roles and attitudes (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). The capacity of religion in sustaining norms of gender inequitable attitudes is complex due to religious institutions themselves being heterogenous (Seguino, 2011). A range of voices can be present within a religious organisation, regardless of whether it’s run by hierarchal authorities. Religious doctrines, rules and norms may slowly change over time due to internal struggles and debates. On the other hand, a major factor in shaping gender attitudes in a hierarchal religious organisation is the attitudes held by those in power. A person’s religious denomination may influence their attitudes towards gender norms and equality in addition to religious texts being the subject of interpretation (Seguino, 2011; Naguib, 2010). When investigating the role of religion on gender equitable attitudes, Inglehart and Norris (2003) found that the kind of values preached in a religion has a stronger effect than the strength of religiosity. However, findings regarding which organized religion is the most patriarchal are contested and is lacking consensus (Seguino, 2011).

Looking at religious attitudes towards menstruation more specifically, restrictions on the menstruating woman can be found across almost all world religions. The common theme is menstruation or the menstruating woman as impure, polluted, unclean and therefore must adhere to a range of restrictions. Here follows a short résumé of the 5 world religions (Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam) stances on menstruation.

For Christians, the Old Testament finds the menstruating woman as impure and that the majority of things she touches becomes unclean. Resulting consequences include a man becoming unclean if he touches her bed in addition to men and women becoming disowned by their community if they engage in sex during her menstruation. However, most Christian denominations today do not follow any specific regulations or rituals related to menstruation except for some denominations, e.g. Russian Orthodox Christians (House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012). Buddhism on the other hand, sees menstruation as a natural bodily process where no restrictions apply. As a possible influence from Hinduism however, some Buddhist temples do not allow menstruating women to enter (ibid.).
According to Hindu belief, it is the menstruating woman herself that is polluted, meaning that she is isolated as an untouchable. Restrictions are many including: menstruating women not being allowed to work, comb their hair, bathe or touch water or fire sources in addition to practicing their religion following not being allowed to share contact or space with people, including gods and goddesses. Following isolation, menstruating Hindu women are required to ritually wash themselves (Dunnavant and Roberts, 2013).

In Judaism, menstruating women are impure and unclean resulting in a range of restrictions, especially for married women. She is, inter alia, prohibited from touching her husband, pass objects to him, wearing clothes that do not cover her completely, singing or to entice him sexually in any way. 7 days following the bleeding, she is required to go through a ritual bath; a meticulous cleansing process. Today however, it tends to only be practiced by those most religious like Orthodox Jews (Dunnavant and Roberts, 2013; House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012).

According to Esposito (2003b), the monthly menstruation causes a state of ritual impurity in Islam. During menstruation, women are prohibited from performing a range of otherwise prescribed religious duties. This include fasting, where one is obligated to compensate for missed days at a later time. Additionally, they are not obligated to perform the required five prayers a day. Similar to men in a state of ritual impurity, women cannot touch the Quran nor attend the mosque. Men are instructed to abstain from coitus with women until “they are cleansed” (Esposito, 2003b). As a result of menstruation being a state of ritual impurity, women are necessitated to perform the major ritual cleansing before resuming sexual relations or religious duties (Esposito, 2003b; House, Mahon and Cavill, 2012). This includes the washing of hands and sexual organs, rubbing water into roots of the hair, and pouring water over the entire body, starting on the right side. The water must be clean, odourless, colourless and is not to have been used for previous ritual. It also includes washing face and mouth, arms up to the elbows, hands and feet. Usually, water is also poured over the top of the head (Esposito, 2003a; Esposito, 2003c).

However, a Muslim feminist tradition is rejecting this view, arguing that the interpretation of the Quran reflects the traditional Muslim (male) hermeneutics and is therefore liable for the imbalanced gender geography within Islam (Naguib, 2010.). In her interpretation of the menstruation verse, Naguib (2010) argues that God instead of imposing a restriction on the menstruating woman, is instead intervening to alleviate menstrual restrictions disadvantaging women. Similarly, her interpretation of the menstrual anxiety does not relate to a “faulting” woman’s body, but rather relates to a general “distaste” for bodily excrements,
similar to blood in general being considered as an impurity. These impurities do not defile someone in their person but are considered impurities when exiting the body (ibid.:43). In other words, it’s not necessarily about the religion in itself, but rather the interpretation of it.

Finally, if religious institutions do incorporate gender norms and rules that disadvantage women, these may be an obstacle to efforts aimed at reducing gender gaps in important areas, e.g. education (Seguino, 2011). Also, as previously mentioned, findings support that negative views of menstruation or the menstruating woman can be connected to negative notions of women generally, this is crucial to change in order to reconstruct unequal gender relations (Tellier and Hyttel, 2017; Peranovic & Bentley, 2016).
4. Research design and methodology
The outline for this section goes as follows: First, I will elaborate on the general design of the study continuing to recount the rationale for selecting the respondents. Then I will go on to elaborate on the methodological approach, ending with ethical and reflexive considerations.

4.1 Design
This study is a descriptive study based on a field study carried out from April to June 2019 in Ghana’s capital Accra. A qualitative respondent research design was employed to address the research questions posed in this study as qualitative methods are especially useful when exploring topics where little is known or when the purpose is to explore how people perceive their worlds (Esaiasson et al., 2017:262). More particularly, the study is a respondent survey investigating how the respondents themselves understand menstruation. The research scarcity on this topic necessitates the demand to hear directly from men and boys regarding their understanding of menstruation (Allen, Kaestle and Goldberg, 2011).

4.2 Material
4.2.1 Respondent selection
The initial interest was to investigate the role of religion in menstrual attitudes (as discussed in section 1.2) in addition to the urban environment as sanitary challenges may be more profound in rapidly urbanizing contexts as the sanitary and hygiene infrastructures are often outpaced by rapid population growth (Rheinländer et al., 2019). Moreover, it was important that the potential schools had a large enough male student population allowing for a sample. Important was also that the school’s (male) headmaster was aware of the issue relating to menstruation and girls’ education beforehand and was willing to participate. The decision was also limited by practical concerns as many schools were unavailable due to schools being on leave. Similarly, by working together with local research broker Rashida Mohammed Pangabu, assisting with local knowledge and contacting schools the choice was therefore also ultimately limited by her personal network. This is a role often neglected within research, in spite of its significant role for research quality and ethics (Eriksson Baaz and Utas, 2019). For example, this resulted in contacting Muslim schools as this is where she had most contacts. The school is located in central Accra, Ghana and consists of a primary, junior high and senior high school (SHS) level. There are about 400 students at the SHS level, 100 of which are male. The school has a strong Islamic profile, demonstrated in both its name and the fact that students attend the mosque every Friday.
The participants were chosen by a school coordinator, a teacher assigned by the headmaster to assist with the study. Naturally, this raises a few possible concerns. Firstly, participants may have been chosen based on who the school finds suitable, e.g. those with the most ‘adjusted’ views. Secondly, the participants might not have been interested in participating themselves, but rather felt obligated towards the school (this is discussed further under section 4.5). However, this does not mean that the results presented here should be entirely disregarded but is an aspect that should be kept in mind.

The process resulted in a total of 24 participants, aged 15-19\(^2\). The respondents came from a variety of programmes ranging from natural science to visual arts. The sex ratio in the classes varied greatly, some participants were one of few male students in the class while others only had a handful of female classmates.

The transcribing was entirely done by me, resulting in a material of just under 27 000 words. Due to unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances\(^3\), the interview notes were lost which complicated the transcription process. This is in particular with regards to the assigned respondent numbers. Although the right voice was attempted to be attached to the right number to the best of my abilities, there is no guarantee that these are correct. Therefore, the respondent numbers may differ although all quotes and information in itself remain correct.

4.3 Methodology

The methodology used in this case study is a series of semi-structured group interviews, grounded in an interview guide with both open-ended and closed questions (See Appendix A). The main advantage of this semi-structured format is that due to the lower degree of standardization, it allows for the interviewer to cover the necessary topics while also allowing follow up questions when unexpected, interesting and relevant topics are brought up. This is especially beneficial when, as in this case, the aim is to investigate ideas that have previously not been researched and/or when the focus is investigating how people perceive their worlds (Esaiasson et al., 2017).

Based on the presumption that menstruation is a sensitive topic and rarely discussed amongst the target group, the six interviews were carried out in groups of four rather than individually. By letting the respondents participate in a group, a situation where there is room

\(^2\) Because the respondents represent a highly homogenous group and their assured anonymity, a list of respondents will not be provided. The list would be excessively repetitive and not provide any important information.

\(^3\) I was the victim of an armed burglary where, among others, computer, mobile phone and notebook was stolen. The sound recordings of the discussions were not lost, however, the notes taken during the interviews could not be recovered.
for impulses and reflections due to group dynamics fostering conversation and the possibility of answering questions collectively (ibid.: 330). The young age of the participants was also taken into consideration, where participating in a group may increase feelings of safety. On the other hand, a common critique to the method is that a group setting might create a discussion environment where one or a few people’s ideas become dominant due to peer pressure, making other participants feel unsafe to make contradicting statements, or not feel as free to voice more personal statements or participate actively at all (Dahlin-Ivanoff and Holmgren, 2017:78). During interviews, there was a varying degree of participation, some participants where highly active and some were not which may indicate peer pressure or uncomfortableness. On the same note, the small size was chosen to both allow the participants to have group discussions, while also limiting the group size to reduce the impact of peer pressure to allow for all respondents to have the opportunity to participate actively. Similarly, a commonly cited issue of the method at hand is group interviews having a risk of social desirability bias, meaning the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a manner considered favourably by others. This could include emphasising good behaviour, and/or understating or denying undesirable behaviour (Krumpal, 2013:2028). However, as similarities arose across the interviews, I am confident that the findings represent an overview of the boys’ perspectives although not necessarily every individual view.

Interviews were held by me, a 21-year-old Swedish student as head interviewer together with Therese Karlsson, my Swedish female research associate having the role of writing notes, being responsible for the recorder and occasionally asking participants to repeat or clarify their statements. The interviews were conducted during school hours in two different classrooms at the participants’ school. Starting off, interviews began with an introductory informative talk addressing the ground rules of the interview, including consent, anonymity, discussion climate in addition to their role during the interview and in the study. Our independent role from the school was also emphasised in an attempt to de-emphasise the impact of the school, allowing participants to feel more safe to voice their own opinions and experiences. Timewise, interviews varied between 40-70 minutes excluding the informative session beforehand. The interviews were held in English due to the language of instruction in the Ghanaian education system being English, the assessment was made that the English level among the participants was well above sufficient. In the rare case of someone not being able to express themselves in English, fellow participants stepped in to help.
4.4 Reflexivity and the interviewer effect

Reflexivity relates to how one must reflect on how one’s position (in terms of visible characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, social position etc.) as a researcher might influence the results in terms of how it affects the setting and the people being studied, which questions are being asked, how is the data collected and later interpreted (Dodgson, 2019:221; Esaiasson et al., 2017). Myself and my research associate were two women, slightly older than the participants, white and from a Western country. In short, we were ‘outsiders’. Our role as female researchers investigating experiences of female bodies need consideration. Relating to the social desirability bias described earlier, respondents are discussing a topic that relates to the female body with two women, perhaps inhibiting more negative views and emphasizing positive to avoid indirect insults. This may also have negatively influenced the findings of the study, especially in discussions relating to teasing (see section 6.1.2).

On the other hand, this ‘outsider position’ was at times experienced as an advantage. Due to us as researchers not being from Ghana and therefore not having the same deep cultural understanding of the country, it was rather experienced as if the participants felt safer discussing these sensitive topics as it meant one could ‘hide behind one’s culture’. This was illustrated by respondents at times beginning their statements along the lines of “you see, here in Ghana/Africa…”. Similarly, being Ghanaian ‘outsiders’ meant some of the cultural norms no longer applied. Understanding that menstruation often is kept secret from boys, yet they may experience it second-hand, an outsider position allowed for participants to learn more and be more open about it. This was demonstrated by all but one group asking questions about menstruation following the interviews, often of an experiential nature. Put differently, it was understood that participants felt more comfortable to open up as this provided a forum where they could do so without social consequences.

4.5 Ethical considerations

There are several ethical aspects needed to be attended to in relation to this study. To ensure the respect and integrity of the respondents, the four ethical principles of information, consent, confidentiality and utilization presented by the Swedish Research Council (2002) have been followed. Ahead of the interviews, respondents were informed of their role and rights in the study, including voluntary participation and the right to discontinued participation at any time and the assured anonymity and confidentiality. One common risk with the method is respondents themselves discussing what has been stated during interviews with people not having participated (Dahlin-Ivanoff and Holmgren, 2017) which was addressed as an
unacceptable behaviour. All participants and the school’s headmaster gave verbal consent. The fact that all participants are minors is another ethical consideration, which was determined in consultation with both the local research broker and the academic supervisor. The conclusion was that considering the consent from the headmaster in addition to the majority of participants being in their upper teens, participants were capable of giving consent. Additionally, as mentioned under section 1, the magnitude of accounts demonstrating fears of leakage and the subsequent teasing from boys is a strong indicator for the necessity to investigate the attitudes of schoolboys in the same age group.

Yet another ethical aspect to discuss is the reaction of female students in the school, as previous research has shown how girls actively try to keep it secret from men and boys. All classes on SHS level were addressed beforehand and introduced to the study as relating to reproductive health. However, the specific topic of menstruation was not disclosed. Whilst discussing questions such as if they had ever noticed if a female classmate is menstruating, no names were ever explicitly mentioned, and the discussion still related to how the boys experienced the situation.

As has been previously mentioned, one might argue that there have been questionable levels of voluntary participation due to the school selecting the participants, opening up for the possibility that participants participate due to their feelings of obligation towards the school. This should naturally be kept in mind; however, the voluntary participation was continuously emphasized ahead of the interview as recommended by Dahlin-Ivanoff and Holmgren (2017).

Names were asked during interviews but has thereafter been kept outside the transcription and analysis of the data. Instead, respondents were assigned a number which has been used as replacement. Finally, the data will not be used in any other way than the purpose stated here.
5. Analytical framework
Here the analytical framework guiding the study is elaborated on. Important concepts for the present study such as knowledge and attitudes are defined here, in addition to what categorises as a positive or negative attitude.

The concept of knowledge is defined as “facts, information and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject” (Oxford Dictionary of English, n.d.a). The aspects of knowledge in focus are the physiological process of menstruation and the menstruating experience, in terms of what is menstruation and how menstruators may experience and manage their menstruation. These are the focus due to the crucial role of knowledge in shaping attitudes, both relating to what the physiological process is, but also how menstruation is experienced.

Attitudes on the other hand, is defined as “a settled way of thinking or feeling about something” (Oxford Dictionary of English, n.d.b). Although knowledge and attitudes may be closely connected (e.g. [inaccurate] knowledge being menstruation as a process where dirty blood is cleansed from the body, resulting in attitude of menstrual blood as dirty), attitudes focus rather on how menstruation is understood in a social manner.

Attitudes can be demonstrated in both verbal and non-verbal communication. A respondent could for example describe his comfortability discussing menstruation, or his body language may indicate his lack of comfortability by his cheeks turning red due to embarrassment. However, due to the issue of unavailable field notes, non-verbal communication and body language will not be discussed here. Looking to the verbal communication then, it relates to how respondents describe menstruation in social terms like reactions and thoughts when a girl is showing menstrual staining in school. I will differentiate between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ attitudes, where positive attitudes broadly relate to whether attitudes help support gender equality and eases the menstruating experience and more specifically to menstruation considered as ‘normal’, a natural biological function of the body. Negative attitudes on the other hand would encompass making menstruation a more difficult experience, impacting gender equality negatively. This includes seeing menstruation as something embarrassing, dirty, possessing magical powers or a menstruator as impure. As is evident in section 6.2.2 this is not always a clear-cut line, where attitudes can be categorised as either or/or both depending on interpretation.

For the third sub-research question relating to the attitudes’ potential consequences for the menstruating peers, I will study the consequences theoretically rather than empirically due to the limited scope of the study, as has been previously described. Hence, here I will relate the
results from the interviews to the consequences that has been shown from previous research on menstruating girls’ experiences of menstruation. Being aware of the limitation that menstrual taboo and stigma may behave differently according to the local cultural context (Bobel, 2019:12), this is however the scope of the present study.
6. Results and analysis
The aim of the following analysis is to identify the knowledge and attitudes demonstrated by the respondents and by relying on the theoretical framework identified earlier, analyse the potential consequences of these attitudes. The analysis is structured according to the three sub-research questions. In other words, firstly I map the menstrual knowledge presented by the respondents. Thereafter, I look into the both positive and negative attitudes in relation to menstruation discussed by the respondents and discuss which role religion seem to have in the attitudes. Next, the findings presented under sub-section 6.2 are discussed in relation to their potential consequences for the menstruating experience in light of the theoretical framework discussed earlier.

6.1 What knowledge do the boys display around menstruation?
6.1.1 “The egg falls down”: Knowledge of the physiological process
All groups demonstrated a general and factually correct level of knowledge of the physiological process of menstruation, noting that they had been taught about menstruation in school. Knowledge included mentioning an egg being released into the womb and the discharge of blood that follows from the egg not being fertilised by sperm. However, factually correct knowledge beyond that varied. A common misconception was the menstrual blood being the result of the egg’s self-destruction due to lack of fertilisation. In two groups, menstruation was described as the egg transforming to and coming out as, blood (Interview 5 & 6). The following quote demonstrates a typical answer:

R13: When a girl attains a certain age, whereby she’s capable of being a mother or capable of conceiving children. The egg that conceives the sperm to be able to fertilise, when it gets to the fallopian tube for a piece of time and there’s no sperm it falls down into the uterus and as a result of the egg not attaining sperms, it breaks down. It causes blood, and the blood comes down as menstruation.

In one group however, the Islamic (traditional) understanding of menstruation was mentioned. This related to women wearing jewellery or gold chains contaminating their blood, and that menstruation therefore occurred for the blood to be cleansed.

R4: I heard there are some particles from the gold chain that enters their blood, so like they menstruate it out to clean themselves. So, all the germs will come out through menstruation.
Almost all respondents were aware of the monthly periodicity. This was exemplified in many synonyms for menstruation included the word monthly or periodic. e.g. monthly salary, periodic blood, period and monthly flow of blood. However, one group displayed little knowledge. When probed further for guesses regarding the length of the menstrual cycle, answers differed greatly. Guesses ranged from three weeks to 2-3 months being the longest guess (Interview 4). One respondent discussed how the egg will be released to the womb where it will stay for one month (R19).

Similarly, respondents linked menstruation to fertility yet displayed lacking knowledge of when during the cycle a menstruator is most likely to conceive. It was commonly cited that sex during menstruation increased chances of pregnancy as menstruation is a sign of females’ fertility, requiring menstruating girls to “be more careful with what she does with the opposite sex” (R7).

The respondents displayed good knowledge on menstrual management. All groups discussed the sanitary pad and underwear as a necessity for menstrual management. Some groups discussed how girls’ leakage was less common in their current school than previous ones, attributing it to better access to sanitary pads. Additionally, all groups mentioned the need for increasing the hygienic routines, which is discussed more in detail under 6.2.

6.1.2 The menstrual experience
The most common conception of menstruation mentioned by all groups was the suffering females go through due to severe menstrual pains. One respondent recalled how a girl had been taken to hospital as a result of to her menstrual pains (R23). The suffering due to pain also resulted in respondents identifying the emotional stress girls may go through as a result, noting that they might cry or scream from pain. Exercise was described by one respondent as a remedy for menstrual pains (R24). Moreover, one group identified the element of surprise, understanding that menstruation may come unexpectedly at times. Respondents acknowledged that it is difficult when menstruation may arrive unexpectedly during e.g. class, wishing there was a better way for menstruation to come. Respondents proposed it should be more like urination, where one goes to the washroom to relieve oneself and then “it’s okay” (R3).

The prevalence of teasing was denied in all groups but one. This may be a result of the social desirability bias discussed in section 4.3, where respondents understate undesirable behaviour. Perhaps this becomes more likely due to the issue of using the school as a gate keeper, where respondents were unwilling to disclose information implicating their school. This may especially be so as the group confirming the occurrence of teasing, described it as being
normal and common. When describing a situation of menstrual teasing, it was said to take the form of both girls and boys shaming the menstruator by laughing at the menstruating girls, because she is considered to be impure. As a result of teasing being common, girls wouldn’t want boys to know about their menstrual status, as they hated the teasing.

All groups were well aware of and cited various religious restrictions placed upon menstruating women and girls. These included menstruating women and girls not being allowed to touch the Quran, enter the mosque, perform prayers, fast during Ramadan or to have sex. One group discussed other cultural practices within some ethnic groups in Ghana, arguing however, that these are relics of the past, or may be practiced in rural parts of the country but not in the capital⁴.

6.2 Menstrual attitudes and the role of religion
6.2.1 Menstruation as a girl’s issue
A few found menstruation to be a girl’s issue or a girls’ matter, stating that they therefore lacked interest in hearing about it or felt unable to take it seriously. When discussing their education on reproductive health and menstruation, a class held in mixed sex classes, it was put forth how a few boys were not paying attention when teachers spoke about menstruation because the information was understood to not be for them. This is demonstrated by the following quote:

R18: Sometimes, what he’s saying is for girls and I won’t have to pay attention to it (…) I’m not interested in those girl aspects.

Similarly, it arose when discussing whether or not female menstruation had any impact on the respondents’ own lives, it was said it did not because it’s “a girl’s matter” (R20). This is not something seemingly related to religion, but rather to the sexes’ different anatomy. The logic arguably relates to how, because the information does not apply to my own body, it is not something I need to care about.

Similarly, one respondent found menstruation to be “weird” due to blood in general being a sign of sickness or not feeling well. Menstruation specifically was not the issue here, but rather blood in general. This is demonstrated by the following:

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⁴ From talking with Ghanaian women in Accra however, it seems to still be present in contemporary Ghana. Women working in Accra but having family in rural Ghana seem to be travelling back to the rural areas to perform these rites of passages.
R15: It’s weird.
M1: It’s weird? Why do you think it’s weird?
R15: It’s not comfortable. You have blood coming out of you, somebody who does not know may think you’re sick or so. You don’t feel good.

This idea may be interpreted as pathologizing menstruation. However, considering a lacking self-experience in addition to how menstruation often is kept secret from boys and how blood otherwise is generally considered as a sign of something being wrong with one’s body, this may not necessarily be an attitude considered negative. Rather, it could be seen as making sense of something according to what applies in other contexts. Blood is generally considered bad, then menstruation in the form of blood exiting the body is also bad. Contrary to these other cases where blood exits the body, menstruation is rather a sign of vitality and health. It may also relate back to the general Islamic distaste for bodily excrements noted under section 3.2 where blood in general is considered ‘bad’. Moreover, this lack of knowledge results in a distancing from menstruation and a lacking interest in association with it, rather than fostering curiosity. Therefore, it is categorized as a negative attitude.

6.2.2 Menstruation as dirty
Menstruation also arose as something unclean and impure. This mostly related to the Islamic interpretation of the menstruating woman as unclean and impure and demonstrated itself as agreement with religious restrictions on menstruators, including not touching the Quran, praying, or entering the mosque (see section 3.2). When discussing the religious restrictions, respondents argued in support of the restrictions. Some responses to their own opinions on the restrictions are listed here.

R10: For one to approach his or her Lord, I think you need to be purified. You need to be purified to take some religious practices or some religious moments, practices like praying as Muslims and as in Islam, one must be purified. So, it’s taken that if a lady is seen in her menses or is in her period, she’s not that clean to go talk to God. So that’s how it is in the Islamic religion. So, she needs to be cleansed and purified to God.

Several respondents: I think it’s very good / Good.
M1: Why?
R23: Because in the face of Allah, she’s impure. She has to be free from her period before she can pray.
R5: It’s like, when they are menstruating, it’s said like, they are unclean. And they need to be clean so they can perform their prayers.

R7: Islamically.

R2: Because you are not chaste, or they are not holy enough.

R4: It’s not even chaste, it’s like you’re just not purified [agreement from other respondents].

R4: There’s no purification, because of the menses.

Even so, it should be noted that the respondents may not necessarily be holding those views ‘actively’, but rather, is a sign of the strong religious beliefs where, because it comes from God, it shall not be questioned and cannot be changed. When probed further on why they agree with these restrictions, respondents were unable to answer with their independent opinions but rather reiterated the religious justifications. This argument may be further strengthened by one respondent’s willingness to change cultural Ghanaian rites of passages regarding menstruation, but not religious traditions (R9).

The image of a menstruating woman/girl as impure or unclean was also demonstrated by the need for a menstruating woman to increase the frequency of her hygienic routines. All groups mentioned the need for the menstruating woman to wash herself more often than regularly during menstruation where one respondent noted the increased hygienic need was to avoid stench (R13). The rate of frequency varied, from taking a bath three times per week to several times a day. This may be an indication of a few things. Firstly, there’s the balance of on the one hand, having to clean yourself due to health reasons and to avoid the risk of infection and illness (WaterAid, n.d.), while on the other hand having to clean yourself due to societal views of her as unclean. Secondly, the guesses may also be a reflection of little practical knowledge and respondents therefore chose a random number. The idea of the menstruating woman/girl as dirty and impure does have religious underpinnings but may also reflect health concerns.

6.2.3 Menstruation should be hidden
Menstruation similarly arose as something that has to be hidden and kept secret. The importance of washing your body is in the following quote presented as a consequence of the importance of keeping menstruation hidden.
R10: If a lady is on her menses, she needs to take extra tasks as in making sure that she’s clean all the time, changes her sanitary pad from time to time, literally, she has to be clean. She has to make sure that she’s clean and there’s no sign of her showing that she’s menstruating.

Menstruation was particularly to be kept hidden from boys, where respondents remarked on how their female classmates were unwilling to discuss menstruation with them. This was illustrated in girls not mentioning menstrual pains and rather calling it abdominal pains. One respondent noted how girls both use a secret language when discussing menstruation and help each other cover themselves when noticing that one has soiled their clothing. This is supposed to prevent boys from understanding what they are talking about or seeing menstrual stains.

R9: You as a guy, you won’t notice. But her own female friends, they’ll notice and immediately cover her up so for you the guy will not see it.
R12: It will be very difficult for you to see it.

[Discussing words used for menstruation]
R9: Most terms would be the girls, we guys would not normally [...] where they will use that term amongst themselves, we the guys will not understand what they’re saying. So that way. Unless you know small small”

6.2.4 Menstruation as a suffering
One way in which respondents demonstrated their understanding of menstruation was by their observations of girls during menstruation; their changed physical appearance and behaviour. Comments indicated that they understood menstruation to be painful as girls seem to be suffering physically and psychologically at the time. It was common to observe the female classmates in pain, looking dull, immobile, inactive or even sleeping during class, contrary to how they usually behave.

R11: In the little experience I have from my class, I mean the ladies from my class you could realise that anytime the lady is in her menstrual period, she feels very dizzy, she sleeps a lot in class, she always feel shy to come within her needs and friends, she’s always isolated. You could see that physically, she has changed. During that period, she’s very dull and she’s not that active and other stuffs.
R15: When she’s allowed to go [to the mosque], she’s open and she likes to talk a lot. And when you see that she’s timid or she’s not maiden, it gives you the idea that maybe she’s on her period.

Due to the respondents seeing their female classmates or sisters suffering while menstruating, respondents felt empathy for menstruating girls. This is demonstrated by the following:

R2: And when girls are menstruating, I’ve heard them talking about it. Like, it’s very painful. You see a girl like in class be like ‘my abdomen is like this, I’m having menstrual pains’ and the pain she feels like, I don’t feel it, but I feel for her. Because she’s in so much in pain.

The above quotes allow for two interpretations in terms of whether these would characterize as a positive or a negative attitude. As discussed in section 5, attitudes are not necessarily easy to distinguish. It could be argued that this suggests an understanding of women and girls as weak, which often is coded as a feminine trait (Hirdman, 2003) and therefore would be characterised as a negative attitude. It could also be argued to suggest a positive attitude, as the empathy drawn from understanding menstruation to be painful could act as a basis of support. Due to the emphasis on the pain reiterated with concern by several respondents in all groups without ridiculing or trivialising their menstruating peers, I interpret these quotes as understanding that the pain is severe, rather than women and girls being weak. This means that understanding menstruation to be painful is coded as a positive attitude.

Similarly, one respondent displayed empathy for how women and girls may experience the religious restrictions placed upon them negatively. This was mentioned in relation to how menstruating females are not allowed to fast during Ramadan, and instead need to compensate the number of days afterwards when others are allowed to eat again.

R3: If she’s passed menstruation from her, they are fasting twice. And she does it like until the 13th, and then she’ll have to pray all these days after Ramadan. Yeah, and at that time I’ll be eating while she’ll be doing the fasting. If you’re in the actual sphere of fasting, it’s very easy, because you’re seeing everyone fasting. But like you’re fasting, and then this one is eating, this one is eating and this one is eating and you’re the only one fasting, I don’t know but I feel bad.
The practicing of fasting Ramadan in this quote is considered to be easier for men, as the fasting becomes an act of the community which alleviates the difficulties of fasting. This is different to how women and girls may experience the fast, as they are required to compensate for the number of days they have missed during their menstruation afterwards, when others are allowed to eat. For women then, fasting does not involve the community in the same way but is rather an individual struggle, which the respondent found was a reason for empathy.

In sum, the above quotes demonstrate how observations of menstruating peers is shaping their attitudes and understanding of menstruation. This is not linked to religion, but rather reflect how they see their friends suffering, evoking a human response; empathy.

6.2.5 Menstruation as normal & natural
Several groups displayed positive attitudes towards menstruation and mentioned, at times strongly emphasised, that menstruation is a normal and natural human physiological process. It was compared to the normality of boys having wet dreams or ejaculating. This does not seemingly have a religious motivation, but rather a biological one. Because these physiological functions were part of the human biology, they were normal.

R9: We see it to be normal and then just as like, let’s say a guy can have a wet dream, we see it as normal for the lady also to menstruate. It’s part of human nature, so we see it to be normal.

R24: It’s natural to everybody. Just like the way it’s natural to ejaculate.

How respondents found menstruation as something normal or natural is also supported by their comfortability in discussing menstruation. Respondents answered questions freely and matter-of-factly. On the other hand, not all respondents felt comfortable discussing menstruation. One respondent did not enjoy speaking about menstruation but felt unable to explain why (R18) and another respondent felt uncomfortable discussing menstruation because “it can be an uncomfortable conversation. Talking about a body that is not yours” (R20).

On the same note, the fact that menstruation was part of human nature and outside of a female’s control meant that girls should not be teased for having menstruation because it would mean you are teasing nature, and teasing nature would be completely out of the question.

R1: Because it’s not like it’s their fault, it’s nature. So, you teasing her, you’re teasing nature. […] So, you have, you won’t think of teasing her.
One respondent was explicit in his disdain for teasing of menstruating peers, due to the strong emotional and physical distress girls go through at the time. The quote demonstrates how observations of menstruating peers and identifying menstruation as a difficulty fosters support, as menstruation is not something one should be teased for.

R2: I have not seen anyone mocking, it would be like the person is evil. I’ve seen the girl in a painful stage, she’s screaming that she’s in pain and other stuffs and you’ll be there mocking, it doesn’t even make sense. There’s no humanity in that.

6.3 Potential consequences of male menstrual attitudes
Both the understanding of menstruation as a girl’s matter and considering menstrual blood to be ‘weird’ can be argued to result in similar consequences, as both suggest uncomfortableness and a distancing from the issue. Considering how males traditionally stand in a position of power contrary to women (Mason et al., 2017), the possible influence of this male menstrual attitude is wide-ranging across the roles occupied by men mentioned earlier in section 3.1. Finding menstruation as a girl’s matter and therefore uninteresting or unworthy of consideration means that males may risk being inadequately sensitized to the potential problems that menstruation may entrain. As noted in section 3.1, actions are difficult to fully separate and attribute to only one role but generally, the distancing from menstruation may influence the lack of infrastructure to facilitate adequate MHM, a lack of understanding for a girl’s menstrual needs in terms of menstrual care products and the subsequent need for financial resources to acquire them (UNESCO, 2014). Moreover, especially the idea of menstruation as a girl’s matter may perpetuate the idea that women’s health is irrelevant to them as men, it may impact their role in reproductive decision-making and their treatment of women, and ultimately have a negative impact on relationships with women (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017). Here it is also evident however, how education on reproductive health and specifically menstruation plays part. Having learnt about menstruation and observing their menstruating peers in school, respondents gained knowledge and an understanding about menstruation which perhaps contests this view and instead provide a basis of support.

Yet, respondents also discussed how they found menstruation to be normal and natural. The physiological process of menstruation is taken for what it really is, namely a physiological process experienced by females. This may build a foundation for addressing menstruation for what it is, a bodily function, without attitudes hindering candid discussions due to fear of shame and/or embarrassment which as a consequence could lead to improved MHM and the
destigmatization of menstruation. However, respondents may host several menstrual attitudes simultaneously. Although respondents identify menstruation as a natural need, other attitudes including menstruation as dirty and should be hidden may remain an obstacle. Identifying menstruation as a natural need may not automatically imply that menstruation could be managed openly, as it is also confined by other social norms, including menstruation as hidden. For example, menstruation distinguishes itself from public urination because menstruation is more restricted by other attitudes as well.

The perhaps most consequential menstrual attitude is menstruation or the menstruating woman/girl as unclean or impure. Because menstruation does not fit within the stereotypical role and behaviour of women necessitating women to be beautiful and fresh rather than bloody and smelly (Winkler and Roaf, 2015), this idea may result in menstruators internalising this view of themselves, and therefore building a negative relationship with their bodies. This is demonstrated by the vast number of girls attributing the feelings of shame and embarrassment of their menstruating bodies (Tellier and Hyttel, 2018). The attitude is likely to relate to two other views iterated by the respondents, namely how menstruation should be hidden and how women must be meticulous in their hygienic practices. Because menstruation is considered unclean or impure, it should be washed away to remain hidden, subsequently requiring menstruators to wash themselves more regularly. The importance for women and girls to keep menstruation hidden results in a state of self-consciousness and hyper-vigilance for menstruators, where they must keep in control of the concealment of their menstrual status (Bobel, 2019:11). This requires girls to a kind of ‘housekeeping’ of their bodies, making sure that the menstrual etiquette of secrecy is not broken. Looking to the educational context in a practical sense, this may result in the inability to engage during class as the students worry about menstrual stains. Breaking this social etiquette could result in social consequences in the form of teasing resulting in emotional distress, shame and lower self-esteem for the teased, besides serving as a lesson for other menstruators enforcing the importance of keeping the menstrual status secret.

Understanding that menstruation may be painful could, as noted in section 6.2.4, serve as a basis for support. This provides an opportunity for men with interpersonal relationships with females to address menstruation due to girls’ poor physical status. This is however most likely to be at odds with menstruation demanded to be kept secret from boys as girls feel embarrassed when menstruation is addressed. As noted in section 3.1, women also take part in the normalisation of menstruation’s stigmatized condition, the culmination of menstrual secrecy arguably being girls’ secret language to keep males out of menstrual conversations. This
becomes an obstacle for men’s supportive involvement in menstrual issues as girls feel too embarrassed to discuss menstruation and breaking the menstrual etiquette.
7. Conclusion
Menstrual attitudes among men and boys is largely under-researched, especially so from low- and middle-income countries. This study expands on this body of literature examining male attitudes of menstruation, providing primary data collected from Ghanaian adolescent schoolboys. The purpose of this study was to investigate adolescent schoolboys’ menstrual knowledge and attitudes, the impact of religion in shaping menstrual attitudes in addition to investigating what potential consequences these menstrual attitudes may entail. Findings demonstrate how respondents possess a general knowledge of the physiological process of menstruation in addition to a deep understanding of the menstruating experience. A web of both positive and negative attitudes towards menstruation are indicated. For example, menstruation is found to be unclean or impure, weird as well as something normal and natural. Religion seem to play an important role in shaping negative attitudes as the religious interpretation designates menstruation as something dirty and impure. Yet, by observing their female peers, respondents learned about the menstrual experience counteracting negative attitudes and fostering positive ones. The consequences of these attitudes risk the probability that they will not become MHM advocates, designating menstruation to take a back seat where menstrual issues are neglected, resulting in the continuation of menstrual stigma and taboo. However, findings also demonstrate positive attitudes acting as a basis of support, especially relating to the understanding of how menstruators may suffer. Thus, findings suggest the importance of acknowledging the surrounding community in addressing menstrual matters, including working with religious communities and leaders in addressing menstrual issues. These contexts have an equal role in ensuring that menstruation is managed with dignity.

Moreover, findings presented here echo results from previous studies from both India and Taiwan (see Mason et al., 2017; Chang, Hayter and Lin, 2011) in showing how boys typically are excluded from menstrual conversations. In contrast to both studies, respondents here demonstrated a considerably higher level of knowledge of the physiological aspects of menstruation. Similar to the former and contrasting to the latter, having observed menstruating peers, participants demonstrated a deep understanding of the way restrictions placed on menstruators affected them in a negative way. Similar to the younger Taiwanese students (Chang, Hayter and Lin, 2011), menstruation is found as a ‘girl’s matter’ and therefore not an issue for themselves. In contrast to both studies, this study also shed light on the role of religion in menstrual attitudes, demonstrating that religion play a role in shaping negative menstrual attitudes which is to some degree counteracted by their understanding of the menstruating experience.
Considering the in-depth knowledge participants gained from going to a mixed-sex school, learning about menstruation and observing their menstruating classmates, shown both here and previously (see Mason et al., 2017), future research proposedly needs to explore the perceptions and attitudes of boys not having access to the same kind of education or observations. For example, this necessitates examining boys attending single-sex schools, or not attending school at all. Equally important, male menstrual knowledge and attitudes need to be examined across a range of contexts, not only the educational. Taking into account how females menstruate far beyond their educational career and move in contexts other than their educational institutions, menstrual attitudes need to be examined in a broader spectrum of settings, including workplaces, within families and broader communities generally, ensuring that menstruation ultimately can be managed safely and with dignity everywhere and at any time.

Indeed, the present study involve limitations preventing the ability to generalize the findings. Due to a lack of control over the respondent selection, findings presented here are difficult to generalize to other populations of boys, within Ghana but also elsewhere. Similarly, the argument made regarding the consequences of respondents’ attitudes have theoretical underpinnings which may not necessarily reflect the situation of menstruating women and girls in Ghana. However, the findings still provide important accounts of menstrual attitudes amongst males.

In sum, this study provides evidence for how some male Ghanaian adolescents think and feel about menstruation. As this research shows, it is of vital importance to address the wider community surrounding menstruators as these actors play a crucial part in the normalisation of menstrual stigma and taboo. If we’re striving to achieve the SDGs and promote gender equality by 2030, this needs to be confronted to allow this physiological phenomenon to be normalised, ultimately ensuring a safe and dignified ‘time of month’. Period.
8. Bibliography


Interviews:
Appendix

Interview guide.

To be noted: An initial draft of this study aimed at researching male menstrual knowledge and attitudes in relation to gender norms and masculinity. However, as results proved to be insufficient, the focus of the study was redirected. This is the reason for themes such as masculinity and femininity are included in the interview guide.

Before the interview

- Inform participants about the study
- Ask for consent for recording
- Ensure anonymity and stress voluntary participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main question</th>
<th>Follow-ups/probes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What is your name and how old are you?</td>
<td>Parents, brothers, sisters?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Who is in your family?</td>
<td>How many?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What do you think of school?</td>
<td>Enjoy it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What is it like to be a teenage boy here, in Accra, Ghana?</td>
<td>What problems are you experiencing?</td>
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<td>6. What are your dreams for your future?</td>
<td>What positives are you experiencing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Is there any difference being a man today, compared to when your fathers were your age?</td>
<td>What are you thinking about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Are there different “types” of people/guys in school?</td>
<td>Worries, concerns?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Important traits of being a man?</td>
<td>E.g. the cool guy, the nerd, the sporty one</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Describe a popular guy in school</td>
<td>How does he behave?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What does he look like?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Sub-questions</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is his life like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How does he behave?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What does he look like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is his life like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Examples? Why him?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it’s different being a girl?</td>
<td>Why, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you have friends that are girls?</td>
<td>Why, why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How many?</td>
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<td>Has this ever changed?</td>
<td></td>
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<td>When?</td>
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<td>Why do you think that is?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe a popular girl in school</td>
<td>How does she behave?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What does she look like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is her life like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is a good woman? Please describe.</td>
<td>How does she behave?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What does she look like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What is her life like?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Examples? Why her?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why is that important?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Among a group of guys, how do you talk about women?</td>
<td>Do you think it's different from your parents?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you say? Love, sex? About who?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to menstruation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever heard about menstruation?</td>
<td>From where? When? How old were you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home, at school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it the same for everybody?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What words do you use to describe menstruation?</td>
<td>Sweden: lingonberry week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever had an experience with menstruation? Please describe.</td>
<td>Friend, sister, mother?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How did you feel? Why?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>E.g. leakage, overhearing someone</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you ever discussed menstruation in school?</td>
<td>In science class, as a separate sex education topic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were you taught?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your reaction? Why?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you feel differently now?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you satisfied with the information you received?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you talk about menstruation among groups of guys?</td>
<td>Why, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the conversation revolve around?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What are your thoughts and opinions?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Knowledge of biological process of menstruation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22. What is menstruation? Please explain.</td>
<td>• What happens in the body?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Why do women get their periods?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How often do they come?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. What kind of products could one use?</td>
<td>• Tampon, cup, cloth, napkin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Practicalities?</td>
<td>• What do you think it’s like?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge of girls’ situation during menstruation (cultural rites?), stigma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25. Does menstruation signify/ mean anything special?</td>
<td>• In your family, culture, religion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How have you noticed this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Have you ever experienced girls being treated differently because of their periods?</td>
<td>• Please explain the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Do you agree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Why, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Are there any limitations to what girls on their period can/should do or not do?</td>
<td>• Do you agree or not agree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• E.g. go to the mosque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Are there any extra tasks girls need to do when they’re menstruating?</td>
<td>• Do you agree or not agree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• E.g. go to the mosque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Menstruation in school</td>
<td>• Do you notice it? How?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think/feel about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Have you ever seen a girl being teased for her menstruation?</td>
<td>• What was the situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Showing leakage etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Have you yourself ever teased someone for their menstruation?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If yes; is it common?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reactions from others?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relationships with women/ Men and menstruation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31. How much do you hang out in mixed groups with both boys and girls?</td>
<td>• Has it changed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Why, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Do you talk about menstruation with women?</td>
<td>• What do you talk about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cramps, its implications on life,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. As a boy, what are the ways menstruation impacts on your life? If at all?</td>
<td>• How do you feel about this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Do you think men and boys should be or not be involved in menstruation?</td>
<td>• Why, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• In what way?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closing questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35. Is there anything around menstruation you’d like to change?</td>
<td>• What?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Why, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Is there anything you would like to add?</td>
<td>• Questions for me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• About the study, information?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Any questions for me?</td>
<td>•</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for your participation!